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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION REPORT - Israeli Elections  
PARIS - Wednesday, March 29, 2006

(A) SUBJECTS COVERED IN TODAY'S REPORT:

Israeli Elections

B) SUMMARY OF COVERAGE:

Dominating all front pages is yesterday's massive strikes and demonstrations against the CPE, and the crisis in the Villepin government. Le Figaro headlines "Villepin Between Two Fires," and says "the UMP is divided over the strategy for getting out of this crisis." Under the headline, "Blockage," Le Parisien identifies the competing strategies as Villepin's opposition to withdrawing the CPE, and Sarkozy's proposing compromises. "Deaf Against All," declares Liberation's front page, saying that despite the millions of demonstrators in the streets, Villepin refuses to withdraw the CPE. Similarly, France Soir underscores the PM's intransigence, headlining, "And Villepin Still Doesn't Budge." The first signs of dissension within the UMP majority are noted. Parliamentarian Bernard Accoyer has "dropped Villepin" and sided with Sarkozy's idea of suspending the legislation. In its editorial Le Figaro comments: "The political right is on the razor's edge, balancing between two opposing attitudes." Interior Minister Sarkozy is on the front page of Le Parisien: "Yes to a Compromise" says the title, while Villepin's "No to Withdrawing the CPE." Inside, Sarkozy says that "compromising is not an insult." In its editorial Liberation urges President Chirac to intervene. A column penned by Alain Duhamel notes that "Chirac is not very talkative" and that 83% of the French would like to hear him on the CPE. The President's cancelled trip outside Paris today is prominently noted and leads to conjecture about a possible presidential address.

The Israeli elections are today's lead international story. Europe-1 Radio this morning gave the final tally as 28 seats for the Kadima Party. This slim victory also makes the front page of Le Figaro, which notes that voter participation, 62%, is the lowest in Israel's history. For Le Figaro this signals a loss of steam for the Likud Party. Liberation comments in its editorial that "the elections are a referendum on pursuing Sharon's policy. The victory is a small victory but it marks the end of Greater Israel." (See Part C) Zacarias Moussaoui's testimony is widely noted. Le Monde reports that Moussaoui "has been waiting for this moment for over four years." Le Figaro emphasizes the "suspicious nature" of his information but also the fact that "his declaration is devastating." Liberation titles its report: "Moussaoui's Plunge Towards Death" noting that "his latest testimony is only one of several versions." Le Parisien calls Moussaoui's attitude "a judicial suicide" and quotes his French lawyer: "it is difficult to defend someone against his own accusations. This has never happened to me before."

According to popular right-of-center Le Parisien, "good news is on the way for prospective travelers to the U.S.: the first French biometric passports should be available in Paris on April 3, according to the Prefecture. As of the month of May and through June 12, all other French prefectures should be able to offer biometric passports. But travel industry experts are skeptical. and are asking that travelers to the U.S. from the provinces should be given priority because they represent more than half of the prospective tourists." The article concludes with the U.S. Consulate in Paris "submerged with visa requests which is also changing its procedure as of April 3: at that time only on-line forms will be accepted."

(C) SUPPORTING TEXT/BLOCK QUOTES:

Israeli Elections

"A Small Yes"

Gerard Dupuy in left-of-center Liberation (03/29): "These elections were tacitly considered to be a referendum on pursuing Sharon's policy of withdrawal from the occupied territories. The limited victory registered by Kadima added to

the more than honorable results for the Labor party equates a victory for the yes, but by a short margin. When the Israeli settlers began to move out of Gaza, the Israeli right's dogma of Greater Israel started to wane. Yesterday's vote confirms this trend. although the voting is motivated more by security concerns than a will to establish peace. Yet this approach is compatible with peace, contrary to Netanyahu's aggressive security policy. Kadima's unilateral doctrine implies a policy of annexation of territories, which the international community and the Palestinians do not recognize as Israeli territories. It also implies isolating the Palestinian entity and making its development more difficult. Development is the first challenge for the new Hamas government and the key to pacifying the region. While this policy of cocooning does not offer a durable solution to the region's problems, neither does it impede a resolution to be found sometime later. This requires a government that can implement its policies. Olmert's slim victory will make it harder for him to lead a coalition government."

"Olmert's Slim Victory"

Patrick Saint-Paul in right-of-center Le Figaro (03/29):  
"Yesterday Israel officially renounced its dream of Greater Israel. Olmert's slim victory should not keep him from implementing his unilateral pullout strategy as he targets Israel's `definitive' borders. Israel's border issue was in fact the main question in a referendum hiding behind the elections."

"Separation"

Bernard Guetta on government-run France Inter radio (03/29):  
"One of the most important lessons to be learned from this vote is that more than a party, the winner is an idea, the idea of `separation,' which implies more pullouts from occupied territories. A page has been turned in Israel. If Hamas continues to reject the idea of negotiations, a unilateral and armed peace will replace military occupation."  
STAPLETON